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ABSTRACT

Paraeducators are school employees whose responsibilities are either instructional in nature or who deliver other services to students. Large numbers of paraeducators have expressed a desire to become professional teachers. Because many paraeducators, perhaps the majority, are from minority groups, they would expand the pool of potential teachers from underrepresented groups. Well-designed paraeducator-to-teacher programs foster stronger school/university collaboration, improved induction into teaching, and graduated assumption of teaching roles as knowledge and skills are refined. Data indicate four primary obstacles that, if mediated, may facilitate successful pathways for paraeducators attempting to attain teacher certification. These obstacles and suggested mediations are: (1) financial support--access to grants, scholarships, and other financial aid; (2) social factors--provision of programs and events for sensitizing the paraeducator's entire support community to the academic and social pressures the paraeducator may encounter; (3) academic obstacles--enrichment such as counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and extended programs for promising candidates who need expanded academic time frameworks; and (4) external pressures and stresses--school-site assisted performance (improved working conditions at the school site including salary, benefits, and job security, and a nurturing, supportive environment). (Contains 13 references.) (LL)

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DIVERSIFYING THE TEACHING FORCE:

PREPARING PARAEDUCATORS AS TEACHERS

ERIC DIGEST April 1997

by

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Diversifying the Teaching Force: Preparing Paraeducators as Teachers

Michael Genzuk

Introduction

The current demographic makeup of our student and teaching populations, as well as the projections for the future, show a striking discontinuity between teacher and student diversity (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1994). The nation's nearly 500,000 paraeducators working in K-12 classrooms embody a promising source of prospective teachers who represent and may be more rooted in the communities they serve. Paraeducators are school employees whose responsibilities are either instructional in nature or who deliver other services to students. They work under the supervision of teachers or other professional personnel who have the ultimate responsibility for educational programs (Pickett, 1994). Paraeducator-to-teacher programs capitalize on the attributes that paraeducators bring to the program and the program streamlines their pathway into teaching. These programs foster stronger school/university collaboration, improved induction into teaching, and more graduated assumption of teaching roles as knowledge and skills are refined. Studies suggest that paraeducator-to-teacher program graduates bring a wealth of community and student knowledge to their practice, attributes that are highly regarded in today's diverse classrooms (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

Paraeducators as a Source of Future Teachers

For several reasons, paraeducators have the potential to become the ideal teachers of our nation's students. They expand the pool of potential teachers from underrepresented groups. A large percentage of this population have been shown to be prospective teachers of color (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). School reformers have pointed to the lack of synchrony between home and school culture as a significant obstacle to minority student achievement (Brice Heath, 1986). Because paraeducators tend to know their students and communities well they help make the school experience less alienating and connect it to the students' cultural experience. In many cases they are native speakers of the students' languages and provide a sorely needed language resource. They bring with them a great deal of classroom experience and a sense of how children learn based on how they themselves learn.

Another compelling indication that paraeducators have great potential for being outstanding educators is the large number of such individuals currently employed in schools who have expressed a desire to become teachers. Survey research estimates that 52% of the Latino paraeducator population in Los Angeles schools aspired to become teachers before they had become paraeducators. After having worked as paraeducators for an average of 5 years, 75% now wish to become teachers (Genzuk, 1995).

High rates of teacher attrition, particularly in urban schools, have contributed to a wide variety of fiscal, as well as pedagogic concerns. Paraeducators, with already strong roots in the community, suggest a staying power that's critically needed (Hentschke, 1995). This not only provides stability and consistency to schools' instructional programs, but suggests the cost associated with support for paraeducator-to-teacher programs is more than offset by savings associated with lower attrition rates in teacher education programs and among newly hired teachers (Hentschke, 1995).

Barriers to Paraeducator Teacher Production

Data indicate four primary obstacles that, if mediated, may facilitate successful pathways for paraeducators attempting to receive teacher certification (Genzuk, Lavadenz, & Krashen, 1994).

Financial. Students of low socioeconomic status depend greatly, if not entirely, on financial aid to pursue degrees in higher education. Aid, however, is not easily available. There has been a shift from grants for minority students to loan programs. Understandably, many paraeducators are less inclined to incur more indebtedness. In addition, higher education institutions, from community colleges to 4-year institutions, have made notably few efforts to secure funding to increase their minority enrollment (Leighton, Hightower, & Wrigley, 1995).

Social. It appears that for many students, minority and white students alike, social factors may strongly influence their educational and occupational pursuits (Tinto, 1993; Genzuk, 1995). External communities (families, neighborhoods, and places of work) and their support, or lack thereof, may play a pivotal role in minority student success at the university. Such communities may differ from college communities in the values, norms, and behavioral and intellectual styles that characterize everyday life. As a result, the adaptation of behaviors and norms appropriate to college may be more difficult for minority students.

The majority of paraeducators are women who are also responsible for caring for a family. Lack of support and obligations imposed by spouses, parents, and children, in addition to other social pressures encountered by paraeducators, are often obstructive. Houston and Calderón (1991) point out that minorities often have no role models to emulate. Many are the first persons from their family to attend college, and emotional support and encouragement comes only from their peers at the college. For this reason it could be expected that persons from backgrounds with low rates of higher educational participation may face particularly severe barriers in attempting to complete degree programs. While pressures of family and peers for minority students may be no different in kind than those for other students, they may however, be more intense.

Academic. Though there is little direct evidence, there is reason to hypothesize

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that minority paraeducators attempting to become teachers will run into more academic problems than other teacher education candidates. For example, minority candidates have a lower than average pass rate on admissions tests for teacher education and on teacher competency tests (Gillis, 1991). The use of tests for teacher certification has reduced the certification rate disproportionately among minorities even more (Crawford, 1995).

External Communities. Many paraeducators find it daunting to accommodate the multiple demands of work, family, and studies. The obligations entailed in employment exemplify how conditions external to the university can be both detrimental and supportive to minority students. Previous studies have suggested obligations entailed in employment pull students away from participation in their college activities (Tinto, 1993). The effect of employment upon persistence depends in part on how the employer views college attendance. When employment is not irrelevant to but part of a larger career plan, the affects of work upon retention may be positive (Astin, 1975). In those situations, the demands of the external work place may direct the individual towards college-related activities rather than away. For paraeducators in a Los Angeles study, external demands at the work site (the school site) were not countervailing. Indeed, survey data indicated that work-site responsibility appears to have bolstered the individual's commitment to his or her educational and professional goals of becoming a teacher (Genzuk, 1995).

Conclusion

Critical to and essential for effective recruitment and retention of paraeducators into the teaching force are well-designed paraeducator-to-teacher programs. Programs designed for the typical college-bound student may not be appropriate. The literature suggests that such programs are advanced by considering the following factors:

Financial support—access to grants, scholarships, and other financial aid.

Social support—provision of programs and events for sensitizing the paraeducator's entire support community to the academic and social pressures they may encounter including from family, university faculty, school site personnel, and other external communities.

Academic enrichment—counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and extended programs for promising candidates who need expanded academic time frameworks to achieve.

School site assisted performance—improved working conditions (salary, benefits, job security); nurturing, supportive environment mediating career pathway into teaching including, direct mentoring.

Paraeducators provide a rich source of potential teachers. Teacher educators and policymakers are increasingly endorsing the concept of an elongated apprenticeship continuum as part of a new paradigm for the development of a professional teacher. The paraeducator-to-teacher model provides a promising example of that continuum.

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